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Statement submitted by Sudanese Women General Union, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Sudanese General Women Union

Enhancement and development of opportunities for women's participation with a view to equal access to full employment and decent work

Introduction

The Sudanese General Women Union (SGWU) is an organization concerned with women's economic, social and political issues. Sudanese women play an indisputable role in these areas, in particular the economic area. It is therefore vital to enhance opportunities for their development and participation, which would improve family living standards and potentially have a direct impact on the national economy.

Legal status of SGWU

SGWU is a national voluntary organization registered with the Humanitarian Aid Commission and the Sudanese Council of Voluntary Associations. The SGWU apparatus and leadership are chosen through free direct election by the base of women volunteers at congresses held regularly every four years. SGWU operates through a general secretariat, headed by a secretary-general and assistant secretaries-general (including an assistant for South affairs), in addition to 15 special secretariats, an advisory panel and a consultative council that monitors performance. It has secretariats in every state and province, as well as grass-roots branches in the form of special district associations. With approximately 27,000 branches and a membership of over five million women, it works across networks with civil-society organizations. One such network comprises 83 organizations. SGWU has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council and works in line with the vision of the State's general strategy.

Vision

SGWU strives for a society where justice and equality prevail with respect to rights and obligations through the economic, social and political empowerment of women.

Mission

SGWU is a national women's organization with a voluntary membership that, guided by deep-rooted principle and values, seeks to strengthen the spirit of solidarity and unity among women and to safeguard their rights and gains. It endeavours to improve and advance the situation of women and achieve their empowerment through awareness-raising, mobilization, participation and capacity-building by way of its agencies, which are coordinated and interlinked at all local, regional and international levels.

Main objectives

- To ensure women's social, economic and political development and empowerment;

- To promote further gains and protection with respect to women's rights and to increase women's representation in decision-making positions;
- To reduce illiteracy rates and raise national awareness in the fields of religion, culture and education;
- To develop SGWU's institutional environment and resources, launch initiatives and establish specialist associations and guilds.

Key factors for success in improving and developing opportunities for women's participation with a view to equal access to full employment and decent work

Constitutional, legislative and legal factors, State policies on women and available opportunities:

Interim Constitution of the Sudan (2005)

Article 12 (1): The State shall develop policies and strategies to ensure social justice among all people of the Sudan by ensuring means of livelihood and employment opportunities and by promoting mutual assistance, self-help, cooperation and charitable work.

Article 32 (1): The State shall guarantee the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all civil, political, social, cultural and economic rights, including the right to equal pay for equal work and to other related benefits.

Article 32 (2): The State shall promote women's rights through affirmative action.

Legislation and laws

All labour legislation in the Sudan is consistent with the definition of a worker and interpretations are based on paid employment or labour pursuant to a contract of employment. The definition includes both males and females. Whether relating to the public or private sectors, this legislation makes no distinction between the rights and obligations of workers on the basis of gender; on the contrary, some laws accord additional rights to women in keeping with those provided for in international instruments.

Some legislative enactments treat men and women as equal, whereas others establish additional rights for women. These include the Public Service Regulations of 1955, which applies in the public sector and accords rights to pregnant and newly delivered women, to women whose spouse has died and to women accompanying a spouse.

National policy for women's empowerment

The national policy for women's empowerment serves as a framework for the government commitment towards women and as a cornerstone for the advancement of women, the achievement of comprehensive development and the successful resolution of women's issues across the board. It also serves as a systematic guide for women's development at the state and local levels. Designed to increase participation by women and strengthen their effectiveness as genuine partners in the realization of comprehensive sustainable development, the policy comprises six core areas of concern: health and environment; education; human rights and law;

political participation and decision-making; peace and conflict resolution; and economic empowerment. With respect to the latter, the policy document identifies challenges, objectives and means, aiming to incorporate the gender perspective into overall economic reforms and policies on the basis of fair equality; the delivery of comprehensive women's health and educational services with a view to the full integration of women into economic activities; structuring and monitoring of gender-balanced budgets; promotion of opportunities for female entrepreneurship; improvement of productive capacities, including the possibility of access to technology, knowledge and skills; comprehensive social security coverage through development of the analytical capabilities of economists at all levels and in all institutions with respect to gender issues; provision of financing and marketing facilities for women, in particular poor and rural women; creation of opportunities for building administrative and development capacities and skills in order to eliminate restrictions imposed on women; gender-mainstreaming in economic policies at all levels; implementation of measures and formulation of policies in the field of maternal, child and family welfare; and greater women's involvement in the elaboration of economic policies and programmes.

Available opportunities

The number of financing opportunities for women in the microfinance project of the Central Bank and several other commercial banks has increased and SGWU special secretariats are engaged in capacity-building and training for women.

Examples of SGWU capacity-building initiatives and activities for women

SGWU's work is administered through 15 special secretariats at the national and state levels, including secretariats for economic development, training, planning, and national, state and local projects, as well as white-collar associations for economic development at the residential-unit level.

The secretariats aim to:

- Increase women's participation in economic activity, develop women's capacities and impart skills to women with the aim of improving their economic situation;
- Train and prepare women, enhance their capabilities and create training opportunities at home and abroad through a variety of institutions in order to widen access to employment and decent work;
- Prepare and design studies of SGWU projects targeting a variety of areas and create foreign and domestic financing channels in order to attract the necessary support for project implementation;
- Improve women's leadership abilities on the basis of project implementation and provide a database for the purpose of forecasting women's needs in the different core areas of development in all states.

Key projects

Women's portfolio project

A number of banks, finance institutions and partnership, funding and charitable bodies contribute to the portfolio. This source of funding is for women

alone and offers substantial facilities, which may be in kind, in cash or in the form of production and other services, with easy finance terms that women can comfortably meet and cope with. Economic advice is also offered, together with feasibility studies and training in skills and performance improvement.

The portfolio is targeted at women who are heads of household, family breadwinners or entrepreneurs, as well as at vulnerable groups of women, associations, private productive groups, widows, divorcees, migrant women and women whose spouses are work-incapacitated. Implementation of the portfolio commenced in 2000 and is still ongoing. Over 9,713 women in all have benefited from the portfolio.

Innovation prize for rural women

The idea of a prize arose following the participation by Mrs. Fatima Khalid, wife of the President of the Republic and honorary chairperson of SGWU, in the First Ladies' Summit on the Economic Advancement of Rural Women, held in Geneva in 1992. The Summit was attended by 70 presidential wives, who sought to promote the development of rural women in the Third World by sponsoring programmes of benefit to rural women in their home countries. The idea materialized in the form of a distinguished cash prize for which innovative rural women would compete and was first put into practice in 1999. Well received by rural women, it was repeated on an increasingly comprehensive and wider scale, with the result that the sixth such prize was awarded in 2006. In 2008, the secretariat convened a national conference on issues of concern to rural women, which produced important recommendations concerning the empowerment of rural women on all fronts, including through training, the provision of funding and easy financing mechanisms.

Interest-free microloans to combat poverty among women

This project involves revolving funds granted in the form of small projects and essentially provided by the SGWU Zakat Office. The funds are for the benefit of poor families and the sums concerned are jointly transacted between SGWU and the Savings and Social Development Bank. SGWU implements the project by selecting women beneficiaries and making all of the necessary arrangements with the Bank, which carries out the funding operation in accordance with regulations and rules agreed among the three partners. The same implementing structure is used for the second portfolio involving revolving funds (microfinance) for impoverished women. Funds are awarded in the form of interest-free loans received directly from SGWU every six months. The full amount is reimbursed at the end of every six months and the funds are reused a second, third and fourth time, meaning that they revolve four times in two years.

A revolving fund to improve the situation of women selling tea and food

This is a SGWU-run project for women in the informal sector and entails revolving funds for women engaged in selling tea and food. Funding is provided in the form of equipment and other means of production. The project was first implemented in Khartoum state in 2004, with 250 women benefiting. After a project impact assessment, the idea was transferred to other states, including those of the Red Sea and Qadaref, before eventually spreading to the remaining states.

Regional women's training centre

A regional women's training centre — the first of its kind — was established to provide special training services for women and to run training courses at the regional and local levels. Expert technical assistance was sought from the International Training Centre (Regional Office for Africa) of the International Labour Organization and an executive committee for the centre was formed. Various external and internal training courses are organized to develop women's leadership capacities at the national and state levels, including courses abroad. Institutional support programmes from such financial institutions as the Islamic Development Bank are also implemented for training purposes.

Challenges and difficulties

- The provision of logistical and material support to ensure that SGWU is better equipped to discharge its functions;
- The provision of resources for attainment of the Millennium Development Goals, which will promote women's access to employment;
- Increase in opportunities for training in gender-sensitive budgeting;
- Training for women personnel in rural and urban areas;
- Increase in opportunities for training in project preparation and marketing for women beneficiaries and work supervisors.

Taking into account the fact that women mostly work out of need and necessity, women's employment has not thus far served as a means to personality enrichment and social status. For women, employment is still arduous and generates only a meagre income that is liable to be controlled and disposed of by men.

Recommendations

- Eliminate discrimination between men and women in the field of employment and devote attention to the establishment of a database on women's employment and training and to the provision of equal opportunities;
- Develop social facilities designed to help working women to fulfil their roles both within and outside the home;
- Operationalize the role of non-governmental organizations in the advancement of working women;
- Provide legal protection and social safeguards.